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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM XL
SUBJECT: VINCENTIAN NATIONAL DAY EVENTS SHARPEN BATTLE
LINES ON CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires D. Brent Hardt, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

¶1. (SBU) St. Vincent's November 25 constitutional referendum was the main focus of discussion with government and NGO interlocutors, and the main point of Independence Day remarks made by Prime Minister Gonsalves, during the October 27 festivities marking the country's 30th anniversary of independence. With active "Yes" and "No" vote campaigns in high gear, Vincentians are anxiously awaiting the upcoming referendum, with many admitting that the vote will have more to do with Gonsalves' popularity than the new governing framework set out in the draft constitution. Gonsalves conceded in a meeting with the Charge that obtaining the necessary two-thirds majority to enact the new bill would be difficult, but confided that he intended to call snap elections if he gains at least 56 percent support, reflecting his belief that he could translate that margin directly into a reelection mandate. The opposition's efforts remain weak, though they are likely to generate enough resistance to head off the two-thirds majority needed to alter the constitution.

End Summary.

A Vote for tQrime minister Sir James Mitchell, Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves, Foreign Minister Louis Straker, Opposition leader Arnim Eustice, as well as civil society, human rights and religious freedom representatives separately on October 25 and 26. The visit to St. Vincent and the Grenadines ended with St. Vincent's October 27 Independence Day celebrations, during which Gonsalves bashed British colonialism, repeatedly charging the British with genocide and oppression. He leavened his gruesome retelling of St. Vincent's history with sunny promises to dole out EC \$30 million to pensioners, Qv)m5ngs with PM Gonsalves and FM Straker, both emphasized the importance of constitutional reform to St. Vincent's democratic development. Each claimed that the new text afforded more freedoms to citizens, reduced the powers of the prime minister, and ensured that parliamentary representation would be more proportional to voting strength. They found it hard to understand why the opposition opposed the constitutional reform bill, passed by parliament on September 3, given that the draft had followed seven years of discussion and debate within the constitutional reform committee and in public forums. FM Straker observed that divisions within the opposition made it difficult to grasp the direction in which opposition members would like to take the country. Both lamented former PM Sir James Mitchell's return to the political arena, with Straker accusing Mitchell of attempting to "pull a John Compton" -- referring to the former St. Lucian PM's short-lived return to power, following his retirement. Gonsalves was more blunt in his description of Sir James, calling him a "stupid man talking rubbish."

¶4. (C) Understanding fully the nearly impossible task of

gaining a two-thirds majority vote for the new constitution, PM Gonsalves speculated that he could call snap elections if he is able to at least obtain the same level of support he was able to secure during his two previous elections -- 56 or 57 percent. He did not discount entirely the possibility of a positive outcome to the referendum, however, boasting that sixty-seven percent could be within reach if young voters register and make it to the polls. Gonsalves calculated that he needed 35,000 citizens to vote in favor of the bill for it to pass, claiming that, if his entire United Labor Party votes en masse, together with "some" opposition New Democratic Party members, the outcome would be favorable. Whether he succeeded or failed, however, Gonsalves said he was not concerned about his own political future. He came into the job of prime minister determined to make a difference, not fix streets and oversee the civil service. He claimed that he would rather be "noble in defeat" -- but added that he would also rather be "noble and successful."

Opposition Crying Foul

¶5. (C) Meetings with former PM Sir James Mitchell and opposition New Democratic Party leader Arnhim Eustace reflected the opposition's effort to make the November 25 vote more about Gonsalves and his party's political future than on the bill itself. Eustace was confident that early elections would be called if Gonsalves was satisfied with the turnout on the day of the referendum, and the opposition was gearing up for that likelihood. Sir James maintained that Gonsalves saw the constitutional reform exercise as an event that had more to do with his legacy than real desire for change. He believed Gonsalves lamented being born too late to be one of the country's founding fathers, and wanted to solidify his place in history. The referendum offered him a means to move St. Vincent and the Grenadines from its colonial past to a republican future. Both Eustace and Mitchell doubted that Gonsalves would secure a two-thirds majority, with Sir James calling it a "snowball's chance in hell." Nevertheless, Sir James cautioned that the electoral process should not be ignored and urged that steps be taken to ensure vote-rigging does not occur. The Charge said that the OAS was planning an observer mission and that Embassy officers would likely participate. Sir James urged that observers come early enough to ensure the reliability of the voter registration process as well.

¶6. (C) The opposition's main concerns regarding the new constitution centered on the possibility that power could be consolidated further into the ruling party's domain by increasing the number of parliamentary seats from fifteen to seventeen by making it easier for the government to acquire private property. According to FM Straker, property acquisition would be based on a "free and reasonable" price as determined both by the seller and the state, as setting prices at market value could short change some sellers. The opposition and civil society leaders charged that by giving the state a role in determining what was fair rather than the market, the constitution created a huge loophole that could undercut land owners. Eustace called the issue one of the key sticking points -- one on which he would not negotiate, given his understanding that the government acquisition and eventual sale of properties throughout St. Vincent and the Grenadines is how the government plans to pay off its mounting debt and buy votes through government give-aways.

Concluding the Process of Independence

¶7. (SBU) Intermixed with national day decorations scattered throughout Kingstown were banners, posters and murals calling for Vincentians to "Vote Yes" on November 25 -- allegedly paid for with state funds. In his National Day speech, PM Gonsalves lamented the legacy of British rule, which he repeatedly likened to genocide, vividly depicting the effects

of slavery and colonialism on the country as a counterpoint to his new vision for the future. He said that the time was ripe to move beyond the monarchy by concluding the process of independence through the passing of the new constitution. (In his meeting with the Charge, he lamented that he was required to swear allegiance to "the Queen of England, Charles, and Diana's boys.") Finally, he announced that the government would be giving away more than EC \$30 million to various social groupings and honored individuals as an "independence day gift." In a separate reception for the diplomatic corps and invited guests, Gonsalves gave a toast to a nation whose future would be "truly independent," wishing Vincentians success on November 25. The Governor General, in a pointed rejoinder, followed his toast with one not on the program -- to Queen Elizabeth II.

Comment

18. (C) Ton Gonsalves' credit, many of the proposed reforms would potentially strengthen the democratic character of the country. The first past the post system has historically skewed election results and left the opposition ranks thin in parliament, and the use of the Caribbean Court of Justice would bring justice back from across the Atlantic to justices who are in and of the community they are judging. Nevertheless, the reform effort has now become inextricably intertwined in partisan politics. so while Gonsalves may hope that the presidential republic proposed in the new constitution would solidify St. Vincent's independence, the upcoming referendum is likely to be more about his popularity than a genuine referendum on reform. Consequently, if Gonsalves secures a comfortable level of support (at least 56 percent), it is almost certain he will seek to extend his time in office by calling snap elections. If he falls short

on November 25, he will at least be able to remain as prime minister until the next round of elections, which are due no later than March, 2011 -- enough time to shore up his base. The re-entry of Sir James Mitchell into national politics may complicate Gonsalves' calculus, and his consternation was obvious in his pointed jab at his rival. Should Mitchell decide to compete for party leadership -- and he has not yet made a decision to do so -- he would give the opposition something it has sorely missed since his retirement: charismatic leadership and the gravitas to mount a serious challenge to Gonsalves' pandering populism.

HARDT